

THE ORAL AND THE WRITTEN GOSPEL

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For me, much of what Kelber says is fascinating but also pertinent. We who preach communicate orally, mouth to ear, and are still part of the oral kerygma. What people believe the Bible says (or does not say) is predicated on what we who preach say it says. Most people, if they read scripture at all, read it with our interpretation or misinterpretation in mind. To be jealously faithful of the tradition is an imperative.

But what is the tradition? This, of course, is the question all Biblical scholars seek to answer. What did Jesus really say? Who added or took away what? What did the church qua church (i.e. believing community) pass on as its tradition either through what was said to or written for the believers at that time. How faithful a representation is it? What history is it recounting? What did it mean both connotatively and denotatively.

Kelber quotes Bultmann as saying that "communal settings leave a distinct imprint on language and language behaves predictably in response to social settings." (So, by the way, does belief and faith structure.) Bultmann then predicated a shaped and shared folk tradition. Maybe the Germanism of that produces an instant question in my mind, but I think more that Raymond Brown's theory that the "church fights" of another day leave their imprint on the community and its remnant sayings or writings just as indelibly.

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Kelber continues with scholarship drawn from the work of Gerd Theissen to present a description of "itinerant radicalism" (Matthew 8:20, Luke 9:58) in which hating one's mother/father, wife/children, abandoning home, property, and wealth were held as normative for the early Christian church. These were believed because they rang true for the people. "Only on the periphery of society does this ethos have a change of survival; itinerant prophets, charismatics of homelessness, loyal followers of Jesus who were beggars and vagabonds, hungry and thirsty, enduring loneliness and persecution, who lived the message they preached, and preached it to those who recognized it, because it was true to their lives as well." (24-25)

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Well expressed.

Let us suppose that Mark is writing for a non-Jewish community (which already presupposes that the early Church's fantasy that Mark wrote the Petrine view of the gospel is false) or a non-temple believing group of Jews, or a combination of both and maybe some others and that this group has enemies. Who would he be writing for and who would be the enemies.

In Raymond Brown's book, The Community of the Beloved Disciple, he suggests that the Johannine community consisted of anti-temple Jews, Samaritans, and Jewish Christians, along with a fairly large Gentile group. Suppose that Mark's community consisted of anti-temple Jews, Gallileans, Jewish Christians, and a fairly large Gentile group who were followers of Paul. Let us suppose that like John's community, they had enemies, and the enemies were the apostolic churches,

those in the hands of Peter, James and John. Would it not then be readily understood that Peter would not come off well in Mark, nor would James and John, and that the disciples would constantly be seen as not understanding Jesus, of suggesting very un-Jesus like ideas, and having Jesus bat them down? For example, if indeed, the apostolic churches were trying to exercise authority over the "Markan group" and the Markan group felt a sense of "us vs. them" and of being outsiders, would it not be consistent that Mark would portray James and John as vying for positions of power and suggesting to Jesus that he should "Put one of us on your right and the other on your left," and thus symbolically place all others in the position of outsiders, away from Jesus?

As I read on in Kelber, more of the same kind of thinking kept coming up. He places great emphasis on the "Wicked Tenants" parable, and interprets the wicked tenants as the temple authorities. Would not an anti-temple group relish such a parable?

Would not those outside the Jewish Christian, Petrine group, be interested in a Greek woman and a blind man who fare better than the disciples in discerning who Jesus was? Suppose there were even Romans in this group. Would it not be likely that a Roman centurion would be the ideal person to recognize the divinity of the crucified Christ? Would not a saying such as "You cannot put new wine into old wineskins, lest you burst the wineskins," take on new meaning to a group which was radically new and different from the Jerusalem centered Jewish Christian followers of Peter?

Kelber then goes off into Pauline writings against the Law. Suppose that Mark is indeed writing for a Pauline group, which Paul is educating to his own version of the oral gospel in which he counterposes

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Paul writes at length on the Law, and Kelber very carefully delineates Paul's true feelings toward the law, in that the law alienates which Christ unifies, since if one believes in keeping the law, one must, like the Pharisees, keep every jot and tittle of the Law; one must live up to all that is written.

Kelber goes on to show more appositives between the written law and the oral gospel:

The law mediates and
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He goes on to show Paul speaking against some group -- not mentioned -- but who presumably are the apostolic churches of Peter, James and John (not the Brown's Johannine community, either, by the way, who were also outsiders) describing their letter of apostolic recommendation and counterposes the same kinds of appositives.

Letters of recommendation vs.
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The gospel written on human
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The law kills
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The gospel invites participation
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Dynamism or synthesis

Kelber also suggests some reasons why Paul himself turned away from a truly oral, pneumatic, and Spirit centered gospel, and suggested some of the reasons for this in the Epistle to the Thessalonians, since they had moved into radical enthusiasm, sexual libertinism, and social deviation, not to mention refraining

from work. They had arrived at a pneumatic theology which supposed an immanent parousia which colored their view of death, suffering, marriage and industry. If the end is in sight, why bother?

The medium is the message -- and Kelber points out that the gospel of Mark becomes in and of itself a parable. The medium in this case, the written gospel is chosen to transform the oral sayings. But why? Were the oral sayings for example, too Petrine? That is one possibility. But suppose the oral sayings were too pneumatic -- too Spirit centered, and if the Thessalonians could mistake Paul's oral message, possibly others could, too, and that would lead to the kind of thing that happened even later when the Spiritists took over elements of the separated churches in Germany and led to riots in the streets, orgies, and running naked about town. Paul, albeit freed from the law, was still something of a Pharisee and that would not do. Therefore, there was appeal to stay within the written code.

Kelber then goes on to point to the importance of the death of Jesus, the destruction of the temple, and the dereliction of the disciples. All of these had meaning for the group for whom he was writing.

It is a supposition of the mythic that the rite predates the myth. Myths are written to explain why we do the ritual, not the ritual growing out of the myth. Bread and wine, the table fellowship, were already established rituals within Judaism. Passover was the major table fellowship ritual of the Jews. The Jewish Christians were familiar with the breaking of bread and the blessing of the cup, but what of Gentile Christians. Here, then was a myth to fit the ritual. "This is my body...This is my blood," and Mark supplied the written Old Testamental scriptural basis for the rite.

Mark presents Judea and Jerusalem as the seat of power but counterposes Galilee as a place of unification and redemption, according to Kelber. Suppose that this group indeed is Galilean and for them the destruction of the temple frees them for a new center for their faith, the Mount of Olives. Together with the Galileans, Mark's Jesus announces a new kingdom which arouses hope for a new Messiah, who is violently killed. His performance of mighty deeds stirs hopes for a kingdom in power, but these are thwarted by the crucifixion. Jesus saves others but not himself, solicits followers but speaks in riddles, Is identified as a Nazarene but is rejected in Nazareth. He declares clean unclean and unclean clean, the last first and the first last. The apostolic followers are blind, but the blind beggars receive sight. The Jewish establishment is hostile, but Gentiles believe. Peter denies, a Centurion sees. And Kelber continues and continues with inversion after inversion with the disciples becoming outsiders and the outsiders becoming the inner core. The parable is the message of Mark, the community lives even if the savior dies. And the community is a radical shift from the expected Jewish, Law-believing, law-abiding, settled community. It is the radically itinerant community which now may indeed have to run for its life.

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*Extremely significant material
dealt with directly and effectively.
A fine commentary on Kelber.*

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